
PORTER SQUARE / LOWER MASS AVE

Notes and “Frequently Asked Questions” from February 5, 2004 Community Meeting

The following notes are based on discussion that occurred at the Porter Square / Lower Mass Ave community meeting held by the Community Development Department (CDD) on Thursday, February 5, 2004. The notes are organized into several different topic areas, and contain comments from participants at the meeting, comments received in writing after the meeting, and information gathered by CDD staff in response to those comments.

I. MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE RETAIL CORRIDOR

Based on comments from participants at the public meeting, as well as information found in neighborhood studies, it is clear that many Agassiz and Neighborhood Nine residents greatly value the retail establishments on Massachusetts Avenue south of Porter Square. Residents have indicated that along with providing convenient services, active ground-floor retail uses serve as “community meeting spaces” that contribute to a sense of neighborhood character and make areas feel safer to pedestrians at night. Residents have also expressed a desire to maintain a retail mix that is neighborhood-focused and feels like a good fit in terms of size and scale. Participants at the meeting expressed concern about whether such retail might be replaced by other uses in the future. The following four questions summarize the main points expressed at the meeting on this topic, and are followed by comments from CDD staff.

1. Are economic forces supporting the development and retention of retail in this area, or does the market currently favor the development of housing instead?

There has been no significant decrease in commercial activity along Massachusetts Avenue as a result of housing demand. Existing retail activity in the area seems stable, with renovation of retail buildings and individual retail shops occurring steadily. In terms of the real estate market, since commercial rents tend to be higher than residential rents, particularly in transit-accessible areas, retail uses are expected to continue to thrive on Mass Ave.

Some new housing construction has occurred in the area, but has not displaced ground-floor retail. The construction of affordable housing at Garfield Street, on a previously vacant lot, was the result of an agreement between the City and the MBTA after the completion of the Red Line extension. Housing construction at Lancaster Street in the early 1980s included retail and consumer service uses at the first and ground floors. The former Long Funeral Home is currently being converted to housing, and while it was a commercial use, a funeral home is not the typical active storefront use that characterizes most of the commercial frontage on Mass Ave. Since the building was originally converted from residential structures, the conversion to residential and office use was a more natural fit.

There have also been some recent conversions of residential structures on Mass Ave to commercial, typically office, uses. The conversion of 1734 Massachusetts Ave from a single-family house to an office complex in the mid-1990s serves as an example.

2. Do the area’s zoning regulations support the development and retention of retail?

The Massachusetts Avenue corridor from Porter Square at the north to Wendell and Shepard Streets at the south is within the Business C (BC) and Business A-2 (BA-2) zoning districts.

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These districts allow almost all types of retail use, along with most residential and institutional uses.

The Mass Ave corridor south of Wendell and Shepard Streets is in a Residence C-2A zone, which allows only residential and institutional uses. However, there are many buildings on that section of Mass Ave with long-established, existing retail uses. These uses do not conform to the zoning, but may continue indefinitely as long as their sites are not redeveloped. If a site in the C-2A zone were redeveloped, it would require a zoning variance to re-establish retail uses on that site. The Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District could be modified to reflect a desire to preserve existing quantities of retail or additional retail activity in this residentially zoned stretch of Mass Ave.

3. If residential or institutional buildings are developed along Mass Ave, is there a way to encourage the inclusion of ground-floor retail? Alternately, is there a way to encourage the construction of housing above existing retail on Mass Ave, to support transit-oriented residential development?

It is the City’s general policy to encourage the construction of housing as part of the mix in commercial districts. For example, in the Business C (BC) district immediately around Porter Square, housing is permitted at an FAR of 2.0 while commercial development is allowed at an FAR of 1.25. In the Business A-2 (BA-2) district, along Massachusetts Avenue on either side of the BC district, housing FAR is 1.75 while commercial FAR is 1.0. With heights of 55 feet and 45 feet respectively in these two districts, three to four floors of housing could be permitted above a ground floor of retail stores.

For a proposed development that includes a mix of uses, such as a residential or institutional building with ground-floor retail, the allowed FAR is calculated proportionally according to the respective amounts of floor area allotted to the different uses. For example, a building that is constructed to be only housing would be allowed to contain more floor area than a building on the same site that includes retail along with housing. This could be viewed as a disincentive to include retail in housing developments. Some adjustment in the way FAR is calculated for mixed-use developments might be considered to further encourage mixed retail/residential buildings along Mass Ave.

Economic factors can also play a role in this issue. The construction of housing above existing one-story retail buildings, or the demolition of a thriving one-story retail building in favor of constructing a larger housing or mixed-use development, might be discouraged economically because of the disruption it would cause to existing retail tenants. Therefore, the construction of upper-story residential units is more likely to occur through new construction, most likely on vacant lots. Also, regardless of what the Zoning Ordinance allows, the developer or manager of a property may simply be averse to mixing retail stores with housing, because of market forces or personal inclination.

With new construction, parking requirements are also a factor. The Zoning Ordinance requires that one parking space be provided for each residential dwelling unit constructed. (The Board of Zoning Appeal may reduce that parking requirement by special permit after considering a

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number of factors, including proximity to transit.) The real estate market, as well as the type of dwelling units constructed, tends to shape expectations for parking, with condominium owners more likely than renters to want an off-street parking space. Nevertheless, there is an overall market pressure to provide parking for residents almost everywhere in the city. City policy aims to strike a balance between providing sufficient off-street parking for residents, to discourage on-street spillover parking in neighborhoods, and sufficiently limiting the parking supply, to discourage excess car traffic on city streets.

4. Is there a way to ensure that the retail in this area maintains its neighborhood-oriented character, and does not become too regionally focused?

From a regulatory point of view, retail is difficult to categorize as “neighborhood-oriented” or “region-oriented.” Any category of retail establishments can be either of the two, depending in part on the size of the establishment, its prominence within the regional market, and the ease of access to the site. Alternatively, some residents distinguish between locally owned and “chain” or franchise businesses as having different impacts on neighborhood character.

Addressing the concerns of image and character through zoning can be complicated, largely because they are subjective—a franchise or chain store could be distasteful to one person while it is another person’s favorite place. Furthermore, the more intrusive the regulations become regarding what businesses a landlord may lease to, the more difficult it is for property owners to manage their buildings and respond to changing markets.

Cambridge has adopted some regulations that limit types of businesses in particular areas. One example is the cap on fast order food establishments in the Central Square Overlay District. According to the Zoning Ordinance, the number of fast order food establishments in that district cannot exceed fourteen at any time. This puts limitations on the expansion of nationwide fast food chains, but it equally limits the establishment of locally owned fast order restaurants.

Some cities in the US have attempted to limit the allowed number of “formula businesses,” or businesses that market themselves on nationally identifiable brands and images. Under these types of regulations, chains and franchises can still locate in an area, but only a limited number are allowed to assume the “look and feel” of their nationwide counterparts. Cambridge does not employ such regulations. However, on a case-by-case basis, the design of a “formula” establishment could be altered through the special permit review process. One such example of this approach is a case in which an owner sought a special permit to establish a Dunkin Donuts in Harvard Square, which was granted after the owner made design modifications to differentiate the establishment from the typical Dunkin Donuts brand image.

II. ROADWAY AND STREETScape QUALITY

The City is in the process of redesigning Porter Square, including a reconfiguration of the main intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Somerville Avenue, reconstruction of the sidewalks, upgrading of lighting, the addition of new pedestrian crossings and bicycle facilities, and the creation of a significant new pedestrian plaza. Some of the main elements of the project include: six additional crosswalks as well as improved crosswalks and longer crossing times; a left-turn

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out of the Porter Square Shopping Center onto Mass Ave southbound; and an enlarged plaza at the Shopping Center to enhance Porter Square and give it a new sense of place. Construction is expected to start during summer 2004, in conjunction with the planned sewer improvements in the area. To find more information about this project, please visit the Porter Square / Lower Massachusetts Ave website listed at the end of these notes.

Additionally, the City of Somerville is planning a reconstruction of Somerville Avenue that will also improve the pedestrian environment along one approach to Porter Square. This project is scheduled for 2005.

Cambridge currently has no plans for roadway improvements on other sections of Mass Ave near Porter Square. However, CDD staff received several comments made by participants at the community meeting, and received in writing afterwards, regarding the quality of the Mass Ave roadway and streetscape. The following concerns were noted.

- 1. Porter Square Station Plaza.** Participants noted that the open space near the Porter Square MBTA station is unfriendly to pedestrians and feels isolated at night. Some participants asked whether a redesign of that plaza would accompany the development of the air rights above the commuter rail station. Officials from the MBTA pointed out that while the plaza is not part of the air rights parcel, it may be possible to include a plaza redesign with the air rights development.
- 2. Pedestrian safety.** It was suggested that pedestrian safety be improved along Lower Mass Ave. Participants recommended improving the system of roadway crossings in the area, with intersections at Wendell Street and Upland Street noted as in need of better crosswalks. The long curb cut around the gas station on the corner at Garfield Street was also noted as a safety issue. Personal security was also discussed, and it was noted that some areas feel dark and unsafe to pedestrians traveling through the area at night.
- 3. Streetscape design.** It was suggested that the streetscape should include more street furniture, trees, and other sidewalk-oriented amenities. It was noted that some existing street trees are in need of care or replacement.
- 4. Bicycles.** A participant spoke in favor of including bicycle lanes with future roadway improvements, but commented that the usual practice of placing bicycle lanes alongside automobile parking spaces, where drivers open their doors, creates a hazard for cyclists. It was suggested that the median in the roadway be reduced to create space to put bicycle lanes outside of the “door zone.”

III. OTHER COMMENTS

- 1. Notification and community input.** Some participants felt that the Long Funeral Home conversion did not include adequate community input. This project fell under the requirements of the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District, which requires that there be a Development Consultation (an advisory public meeting) only when new construction on a

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site is at least 6,000 square feet. New construction at the Long Funeral Home site was less than 6,000 square feet.

- 2. Liquor licenses.** It was noted at the community meeting that the liquor license “cap” might be an issue for the area, because new restaurants that are unable to secure a liquor license may find it difficult to establish themselves in the area and compete with existing licensed establishments. For more information about licensing policies, please contact the Cambridge License Commission, located on the first floor of 831 Massachusetts Avenue. Phone: (617) 349-6140.

IV. INFORMATION ON MBTA AIR RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT

In June 2003, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) issued a request for proposals (RFP) inviting developers to bid for a long-term lease of the air rights over the Porter Square commuter rail station. The two respondents to the RFP were Lesley University and Oaktree Development. Lesley proposed to build a 200-bed dormitory and publicly accessible food court on the site. This bid was deemed non-responsive because Lesley did not offer to pay the full \$4 million specified in the RFP. Oaktree proposed to build about 80 condominium units on the site. This bid has not been officially accepted, but Oaktree has indicated that it would pay the requested \$4 million.

The MBTA has asked Oaktree to work with Lesley and with the neighborhood to refine its development proposal, taking into account different parties’ needs and concerns, before it can formally accept the bid. The Porter Square Neighbors Association has held several meetings in order to foster a better understanding of the two proposals, and, after discussion, has indicated that it would prefer a comprehensive development plan for the entire block instead of a piecemeal, site-by-site development process. One of the challenges Oaktree faces is that it would only control the air rights parcel, not any other land on the block, and so access to the site and the accommodation of parking would be difficult. Therefore, Oaktree has proposed that it jointly develop the entire block along with Lesley. As of March 16, Lesley has indicated that it is currently not interested in pursuing this proposal.

Conversations among the MBTA, Oaktree, Lesley, and members of the community are ongoing. When a detailed development plan has been finalized, as with all development over 50,000 square feet, this development will be subject to the City’s Article 19 special permit review, through which the City will conduct an analysis of traffic, parking, and urban design issues.

V. INFORMATION ON LESLEY UNIVERSITY’S LONG-TERM PLANNING

According to its annual “Town-Gown Report” to the Cambridge Planning Board, Lesley University is anticipating some growth in its operations over the next decade, and is engaged in a long-range campus planning process to plan for facilities that will accommodate this growth. In 1998, the University acquired the Art Institute of Boston (AIB), an undergraduate college with about 550 students, which it expects to move into Cambridge from its current 55,000 square foot complex in Boston. It is also considering expanding the enrollment of Lesley College, its undergraduate college of arts and sciences, which currently has around 500 students. Lesley’s

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leadership is still discussing its enrollment policy. Lesley’s administration has agreed to report back to the Planning Board when its policies have been established and its campus plans are more developed.

At present, Lesley expects to remain in Cambridge with a two-part campus, one in Agassiz (the “South Campus”) and one in Porter Square (the “Porter Campus”). Its aim is to create more of a “campus feeling” in Porter Square, with development that will support its own community and also serve the neighborhood at large. The area may become an “arts-oriented” campus, home to the AIB and other arts-related academic, housing, commercial, and community uses. Lesley intends to expand in this area by moving facilities into buildings it already owns in Porter Square and by developing on parking lots it owns near the Porter Exchange building. Lesley has sought to develop the commuter rail station air rights as well (see above). Lesley has agreed to return to the Planning Board when its master planning process is complete.

VI. DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF SELECTED SITES

Some participants at the meeting expressed an interest in knowing the development potential of certain sites along Massachusetts Avenue, for example, the Alamo car rental facility. CDD staff will conduct a buildout analysis of selected developable sites, and will present that information at the next community meeting.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Additional materials, handouts, and information can be found on the web:

<http://www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/commplan/zoning/psqlma>

or by contacting Jeff Roberts, Neighborhood Planner, at 617-349-4639.